

TRANSCRIPT

John Verkamp Interview

Recorded February 26, 2009 at Grand Canyon's 90th Anniversary Celebration and the Grand Opening of Verkamp's Visitor Center

Shannan: Welcome! This is Ranger Shannan; and on Thursday, February 26, 2009, Grand Canyon National Park celebrated its 90th anniversary; and in conjunction with that celebration, the park commemorated the opening of the Verkamp's Visitor Center. John Verkamp the 3rd, grandson of the founder of Verkamp's Curios, was invited to speak during the celebration and chose to tell a beautiful story. I would like to thank John for agreeing to repeat his telling of "a day in the life of the Verkamp children" during our interview.

Shannan: You shared a quick story when the ceremony was going on for the 90th anniversary. Do you mind sharing really quickly just part of that? It was a really cool story and I was wishing I were standing right there with you.

John: Well, I still have my notes.

Rustling papers.

Shannan: All right! Go ahead.

John: Well, I thought it might be more interesting to just have people know what it was like living here as a you boy. So, I was talking about the five of us; and we're now in the bedroom where the five of us lived....

Shannan: Twenty... is that even twenty feet?

John: I don't know what it would be.

Shannan: That's maybe fifteen by twenty feet...that's a lot of kids!

John: So, there were five of us in here; and then I mention that...and I mentioned that the tourists would often times wake us up because they'd all be out laughing and talking on the rim, them not realizing that we were living up stairs, and thinking it was just a store. And that's how we'd wake up a lot of mornings.

So, I tried to take it from the day...from the time we woke up 'til the time we went to bed. So, have you seen the little bathroom that we have in here?

Shannan: Yes, I have.

John: Then you've seen how small it was for seven people. I mean you can't...you can barely fit one person in there at a time. So having seven people have to share that bathroom every morning was quite a...like I said logistically very tricky.

Shannan: Was there like a schedule?

John: No, but there was a lot of....

Shannan: Oh...Whoever got there first?

John: Hurry up! Hurry up...cause my dad always got first crack at it since he had to open the store. So, we were all out there waiting for him, sayin' "come on dad hurry up!" and we either had to do that or run downstairs and use the little restroom downstairs. So, it was kind of crazy for seven people

And then, we'd have our little breakfast of Cheerios; and then dad would have us all go down and put up the American flag. That was the first thing we had to do every morning—make sure that was done.

Shannan: Was that one child's responsibility, or a group?

John: I think we kind of shared it.

And then we had to put out the rugs—the Navajo rugs on the different balconies, and then just put heavy rocks on them; and they'd sit out there all day; and then at night, we'd go back and retrieve them. Did that and then we'd...I described policing up the area which meant, for my dad, everybody had to get out there and work like crazy for a half hour or so and pick up all the cigarette butts, all the Kleenex, do all the cleanup for the whole area out in front of the store so it looked nice next day; and we'd go probably half way down to the Hopi House just to make sure that everything looked nice up in this area. In his own way, it was kind of an environmentalist type situation. So, we did that then we used to have to also shovel snow all the way down to the Hopi House. Otherwise people would get to the Hopi House and stop 'cause there was no path up here. So, to keep people coming we'd shovel...which is a long way! It's a lot of path there.

We had two Hopi guys that worked for my dad. One's name was Donald Longhoma and one of them was David ?...; and they worked for us for years. So, they used to teach us the Hopi hoop dance and they taught us how to spin tops with a stick and a leather strap attached to the stick. Phyllis is his granddaughter and I had that in my notes, but....

Shannan: And that sounds like a very traditional game to me.

John: Yeah! Yeah, and they taught us how to do that.

Shannan: Take a lot of skill?

John: It was....

Shannan: It sounds hard to me.

Laughter

John: I don't think we ever really learned. They taught us how... I mean they showed us how but I don't think we ever really learned.

And then I talked about when the snow melted, and the roof leaked a little bit; and we had to run around with buckets trying to catch the water from each leak; and all of us were running around with buckets in different directions to catch the water. *(Two laughing)*

And then the fact that when we had dinner we used to have dinner right... we had just a real plain old dining room table right there. It was just on two saw horses and kind of a flat door was all it was. A very simple table, Not a whole lot of space there.

We had a little walkie-talkie that was from downstairs to upstairs and they'd say... they would just yell in "rush", and that would mean that the Indian dance has just ended and everybody was headin' our way so that we'd all have to put our meals in the oven and go running downstairs and help out while there were some people there and that happened just about every night.

Then there was no TV whatsoever. So... and the radio was just real erratic. I mean, at least now they have TV here. We had no... I grew up with no TV whatsoever.

Then Mom would bring us in here and she'd read us a few little stories, say a little nightly prayer that she made up on her own; and then she'd leave, and we'd begin scrambling around and laughing and joking until finally she'd get fed up and throw her moccasin over against this door; and once that moccasin hit the door, we knew we'd better get to sleep.

So, I was just trying to convey... just kind of a day in the life

Shannan: That's perfect. That's the Verkamp family story.

John: Yeah!

Shannan: That's great!